

Case Study: Mark Church – Dŵr Cymru (Welsh Water)

It's a situation faced by many people in today's rapidly changing workplaces – your job changes or becomes redundant and you find yourself asked to take on a different role. But what do you do when you find that your new role requires completely different skills, skills that you are not sure you have?

When Mark Church first found himself redeployed from his manual maintenance job into a new, more technical role within Dŵr Cymru (Welsh Water), he was worried that he didn't have the right skills to succeed. Now, thanks to the help of union-led learning, Mark (pictured right) has not only gained the skills he needs for this new role but has also discovered a love of learning that has conquered a life-long difficulty with reading and writing that stemmed from his school days.



Difficulties since school

Like many of us, Mark had a bad experience of learning at school. "I just didn't enjoy it" he explains. "I found it hard to hear the teacher and it was difficult to concentrate when there was a lot of background noise and distraction in the class." Mark also felt self-conscious about asking questions when he didn't understand something, as he felt he didn't learn as quickly as the others. Because of this, Mark found that he would miss things and quickly started to fall behind on his work.

So it was with some relief that Mark put his school days behind him when he started working at Dŵr Cymru, at the age of 18. Dŵr Cymru is responsible for providing over three million people in Wales with drinking water and for properly treating and disposing of waste water. For many years Mark was employed in the maintenance services division of the company, where he got on well and never had any difficulties in his role. He quickly got used to working on his own and the routines and procedures required for the various different maintenance tasks. Although he was happy in his work, he explains that over time, he found his skills and confidence levels had dropped. "I suppose I got set in my ways" he says. "Because I was mainly working on my own, I didn't really have to use my communication or writing skills from day to day."

Because Mark had never enjoyed learning at school, this had led him to have some difficulties in reading and writing fluently, which he had not been able to overcome. In fact, now in his 40s, Mark found the difficulties had become more challenging. He explains, "I suppose over time it got worse. I started to lose the skills I had, because I didn't need to use them." This proved a barrier to learning new things and was something that affected Mark's confidence, "I couldn't pick up and read a book or a newspaper like other people" he explains, "I would always miss words, and have to re-read it several times over to try and understand it". He continues, "I also had difficulty with writing because I couldn't spell long words and would struggle with grammar and punctuation." Although this was an issue that often worried him, Mark didn't think there was much he could do to change his situation. He had always been able to put his worries about it to one side at work to a large extent, as the role he had done mainly required manual skills. He had never really had to confront it as an issue and had always felt able to cope and 'get by' at work, up until that point.

The challenge of a new role

However, a couple of years ago the situation changed radically. Mark was told that due to the modernisation of the company, his job in maintenance was coming to an end and he was going to be



redeployed to work as a Network Inspector at the company's Broomy Hill Water Treatment Works, near Hereford (pictured above right). Mark learned that the new job involved much more written work and also the use of a 'Toughbook' computer to record information and communicate with other staff. This was a total departure for Mark, as he had never had to use a computer at work before. He became very worried that he would not be able to do the job. "I panicked" Mark explains, "I really didn't know what I was going to do. I realised I would no longer be able to get by with the level of skills I had."

Mark knew that he would have to try and do something about his situation if he was going to be able to fulfil the requirements of his new post. "I wanted to do the work to the best of my ability, I wanted to be able to get on with the job" he explains. Understandably it was difficult for Mark to raise the issue directly with his manager when he was anxious to make a good impression in his new job. So instead he went and spoke to his workplace union learning representative, Garry James, as he had heard Garry could provide confidential advice about training needs.

Mark's union get involved

Garry arranged for Mark to have a diagnostic assessment of his essential skills (reading, writing, communication, IT and number skills). The results suggested that Mark might benefit from some training to help improve his skills in these areas. Garry spoke to the lead union learning rep at Dŵr Cymru, Mike Wilson, and Mike arranged for Mark to attend training that they had organised for a group of staff who all needed training at a similar level. Mark was keen to take up the training, however after a few months passed, he found that the same concerns and self-consciousness from his school days about learning in a group were still holding him back. He explains, "I felt like an idiot if I had to ask a question and I was worried that others might snigger. I also had a lot of work on at the time and so it was difficult to attend all the sessions and keep up."

Mark spoke to Mike about his concerns, as he was worried that he might not be able to continue with the training. Mike was determined to make sure that Mark did not miss out on the training he needed. He spoke to the training provider, Arfon Dwyfor Training (ADT), who are specialists in providing essential skills training, and he arranged for Mark to have one-to-one sessions with a tutor rather than group sessions. Mike also arranged for the timings of the sessions to be flexible to suit Mark's work schedule. Funding for the course was arranged through Essential Skills Wales, a Welsh Government administered fund to help improve adults' essential skills.

Getting the right training

The other problem Mike had to solve was finding a quiet, private room for the one-to-one training sessions that would be available when Mark needed it. The site where Mark works is quite a busy one where lots of meetings take place, so it was not an easy task. However, after explaining the situation to Mark's Area Manager, Kevin Bateman, Mike was pleased to find that he was extremely supportive, and was even willing to give up his own office for Mark and his tutor to use for the training. This made a huge difference to Mark. He explains, "It was much easier to focus at the one-to-ones and I was able to go over things again and again until I got them, without feeling daft or worrying that I was holding up other people in the class."

Mike also liaised with ADT to make sure the training Mark received was customised to incorporate the computer hardware and software he needed to use in his new role, as well as incorporating literacy and communication skills into the IT training at the same time. Mike explains, "I asked ADT to use the Toughbook in the training they did with Mark, so he could practice applying his new IT skills with the equipment, systems and communication skills he needed to use in his job." Mark found this aspect of the training

particularly useful. He says, “To learn by actually being shown one-to-one and to be able to practice doing what I needed to do on the Toughbook, made me feel much more confident to go back and use it in my job.”

Huge benefits from the training

These new IT skills were not the only benefit Mark got from the training, “My spelling, pronunciation and punctuation have all improved. I started to learn rules about grammar and punctuation that I probably should have learnt in school but never did.” He continues, “Learning about these little rules has been really helpful, suddenly the penny drops and I’m able to remember it forever because I’ve had it explained to me properly.” The course has also made a huge difference to Mark’s confidence in reading and writing, he says, “I feel that this training has at last taught me to read properly, I’m now able to read things without missing words and am able to get it fixed in my mind”. He goes on, “I’ve learnt lots of simple tips and tricks with writing such as breaking down long words in to smaller sections to help spell them.” He concludes, “I’m now able to do the forms I need to do at work without a second thought when previously I would have struggled.”

Joint working between the union and the employer – supporting success

Mark’s story is just one of the success stories that Mike Wilson has been involved in. As the lead union learning rep at the company Mike has organised hundreds of training opportunities for staff. Mike’s role is now being jointly funded by Dŵr Cymru and the Wales Union Learning Fund (WULF). This enables him to work 3 days per week on promoting learning within the company, which has around 2800 employees at sites all over Wales and in parts of England. As well as liaising with training providers and identifying funding, part of Mike’s role has also been to make the case to the company on the benefits of them supporting workplace training. Mike has been effective in convincing the company of the value of the training by showing how it can help raise staff morale and productivity.

As a result the company have been very supportive in agreeing to release staff to attend training and they have also provided training rooms and equipment to facilitate many training sessions, as well as contributing funding for Mike’s role. Mike, who is from the GMB union, now leads a team of 12 union learning reps from a number of different unions, and together they have promoted learning to staff throughout the company through meetings and a series of road shows. In the last few years, the team have signed up hundreds of staff on to essential skills courses. Between them, these learners have now achieved more than 800 qualifications. And through word of mouth, the reputation of the courses has grown and grown amongst the staff. Mike explains “Our goal is to get all staff up to Level 2 (GCSE Level) on their essential skills. We want to give staff learning opportunities that they may have missed out on earlier in life, so that they are able to adapt to changes and progress in the organisation. It gives them the confidence to realise that they can go for new opportunities that come up and continue to develop their skills.”

It’s never too late

As for Mark, he says he is absolutely “chuffed to bits” with his new skills and is now working towards a qualification. He enthuses, “I’m now able to help my 2 daughters with their homework which means a lot to me. I feel I’ve learnt more in the short time I’ve been doing this training than I did the whole time I was at school.”

Mark is full of praise for his tutor, Clare, whom he says was

“absolutely brilliant”. He explains “It’s not just the time and patience she showed me with going over things until I understood them, but also the way she could put me at ease and we could always share a joke so I didn’t feel silly asking questions.”



Mark is also extremely grateful for the support of his union learning reps, Garry and Mike, "It is one of the best things I've ever done, but I couldn't have done it if they hadn't arranged the one-to-ones for me." Mark, pictured above addressing colleagues at a recent learning celebration event, is now actively encouraging others to take up training opportunities "I would recommend the training to anyone in a situation like me. You never know when you're going to have to change your job and my experience is proof that it really is never too late to learn new skills."